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A GUIDE TO SHELLFISH PURPLE IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

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It is surprisingly well known, as a bit of trivia, that the purple trappings worn and treasured by the ancient Mediterranean world's elite were made from great numbers of marine snails. However, there are a number of enduring misconceptions regarding the manufacture, origin, and symbolic roles of shellfish purple dye. In light of this, the present guide surveys the most notable occurrences of shellfish purple in texts ranging from Linear B tablets to late-Roman legal codices, as well as key pieces of archaeological evidence, in order to resolve the most glaring of these misconceptions. Chapter I outlines how shellfish purple was made, from the collection of the snails themselves up to the removal of the wool fleece from the dye-vat, and clarifies various details of the dyeing process that have been misunderstood by certain scholars. Chapter II explores the archaeological evidence for the earliest large-scale production of shellfish purple in the Bronze Age Aegean, both dispelling the theory that the Phoenicians were the first to discover the dye and challenging whether the notion of its “discovery” by any one community is an adequate framework for interpreting this archaeological evidence. The same chapter also provides a detailed examination of the earliest attestations of the *porphyr*- root (from which our word “purple” derives) in three Linear B tablets from Mycenaean Knossos. Chapter III addresses the issue of purple and status—a crucial subtext for the prior chapters—through a survey of the Greek and Latin sources, both literary and legal, on shellfish purple. As a whole, the guide aims to provide a thorough yet holistic overview of what we may rightly call the ancient world's most unique luxury good, a beautiful and mysterious dye that has held onto our fascination for millennia.